

## **Volunteer: Show Our Unity**

*By Senator Debbie Stabenow*

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An idea to honor the victims of September 11 that began in Michigan is now a national program and I would like to see as many of my fellow Michiganians get involved as possible.

Although the physical centers of the tragedy are in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, the human tragedy spans the country and the globe. As I travel around Michigan, I constantly meet people who lost a friend or loved one in the attack. And it's the same in every state in America and in 88 other nations.

I wondered how we could properly honor the victims of a tragedy so vast.

Then one of our fellow Michiganians – Bob Van Oosterhout, from Harrison – wrote me with an idea that went something like this: Why not have the federal government create a program that would help individual communities create memorials for individual victims? Those individual memorials would then stretch across the country, creating a great national memorial that would run from Michigan to Texas and New York to California.

I thought this was a great idea, so I sponsored the bipartisan Unity in the Spirit of America Act that was signed into law by President Bush in January.

Here's how it works: Neighborhood associations, non-profit organizations, houses of worship, local businesses or just friends and neighbors would choose some kind of volunteer project that will improve the quality of life in their community and promote unity.

Projects can be both sweeping and small. They can be as large as building a park or renovating low-cost housing. Or as simple as adopting a school and acting as mentors and tutors for the students.

We leave it up to the community to decide what kind of project best fits local needs.

Each project will be dedicated to a specific victim of the September attacks. The names will be assigned by the Points of Light Foundation, which will soon be taking registrations on its website – [1800Volunteer.org](http://1800Volunteer.org) – or by calling 1-800-VOLUNTEER.

This kind of national volunteer effort has historical precedent.

Shortly after our nation was attacked at Pearl Harbor, the call went out for Americans to plant Victory Gardens. Eventually, 20 million Americans across the nation had turned backyards and vacant lots into small farms.

In Michigan, there were more than 1 million Victory Gardens – 20,000 in my home county of Ingham.

This had a practical effect. At their height, Victory Gardens produced about 40 percent of our nation's produce.

But there was a spiritual effect as well. Victory Gardens gave Americans a chance to show their support for the war and demonstrate to the world our unity and resolve.

Like Victory Gardens, the Unity in the Spirit of America Act effort will have both practical and spiritual benefits. But rather than growing food, this voluntary effort will be about raising hopes and improving communities.

I can't think of a more fitting way to honor all those who died at the hands of hate than by dedicating in their names thousands and thousands of selfless acts that make the world a little better.

Please think of getting together with your friends, neighbors and coworkers and working to create your own Michigan memorial to the global tragedy of September 11. Show the world your Unity in the Spirit of America.